

New support for local business owners

New and improved Business-Resource Connection series highlights networking, local resources available to assist

By SHANNON GOLDEN
The Observer

LA GRANDE — La Grande Main Street Downtown is relaunching its monthly networking series, Business-Resource Connection, for local business owners after a break for the summer. Attendees can learn from different organizations about a wide variety of topics to help their businesses better understand and utilize their local resources.

“We are looking to do whatever we can to make a thriving downtown, because that does have that trickle back to a thriving overall community,” project chair Suzannah Moore-Hemann said.

The series will take place on the third Tuesday of each month from 8:15-9:15 a.m. at the Ignite Center, 104 Depot St. It is an expansion of previous series La Grande Main Street Downtown has hosted in the past. The first meeting will take place Tuesday, Sept. 20.

La Grande Main Street Downtown is part of the national Main Street Program, a subsidiary of the National Trust for Historic Preservation. The nonprofit generates investment, jobs and rehabilitation in downtown areas. It works alongside businesses and local organizations to plan events and provide support.

“One of the goals of re-launching this series with adjustments to the time and format is to highlight the wide range of resources we have locally which businesses can leverage to really elevate their performance,” said Timothy Bishop, the city’s Economic Development Director and committee chair of the Economic Vitality Committee, in a press release.

The committee began hosting the series in the spring of this year. Now they are bringing back the series with the goals of offering resources and fostering connections. Moore-Hemann also noted that the new time slot is meant to make the series as accessible as possible.

The spring sessions took place at noon but upon querying some of the attendees, they learned that many business owners couldn’t attend because they had to cover the lunch hour for their employees. Moore-Hemann said the earlier time slot will hopefully capture more business owners before they are “in go-mode” for the day.

“It’s not meant to be super long and drawn out,” Moore-Hemann noted. “We want to be really respectful of everyone’s time.”

City of La Grande’s Economic Development department, Eastern Oregon University’s Rural Engagement and Vitality Center, Eastern Oregon Visitors Association and the Eastern Oregon Workforce board are among the list of organizations that will come to speak during the monthly series.

According to Moore-Hemann, some of Business-Resource Connection series’ sessions will also consist of human resources services, panel discussions, tax preparation and more.

“A lot of businesses might not have access to always having an accountant on hand or might not have an HR department like the larger organizations do,” she said.

The series has no set end, and the committee will look to expand the series or make it more frequent, depending on participant feedback. Main Street Downtown also has other series it is planning to boost the city’s economic vitality.

“We really have the opportunity to make a positive impact for the businesses by offering those,” Moore-Hemann said. “If we can raise the water level, all of the boats will rise together.”

The promotion and resources for the series are partially funded by the city of La Grande’s Rural Development Initiative grant. Light refreshments and coffee will be provided.



Moore-Hemann

ONLINE

For more information about La Grande Main Street Downtown, visit www.lagrande-mainstreet.org.

HAPPY WALRUS, happy customers

Happy Walrus Farm Stand brings fresh produce, flowers to downtown Imbler

By SHANNON GOLDEN
The Observer

IMBLER — For those driving through downtown Imbler, the last thing they might expect to see is a walrus. But one needs to look no farther than the corner of Ruckman Avenue and Main Street to spot this marine mammal — on a sign welcoming passers-by into the new Happy Walrus Farm Stand.

Kagan Koehn, alongside her partner, Dylan Howell, and her parents, Susan and Toby Koehn, opened the new farmstand on Saturday, Aug. 20, to increase access to fresh produce for rural communities in Union County.

“Ideally, if everybody could shop at a farm stand that was a couple of miles from their house, I think that would be like the perfect world,” she said.

According to a United States Department of Agriculture report released in August, prices for fruits and vegetables are now predicted to increase between 7% and 8% from 2021 to 2022. The Bureau of Labor Statistics reported in May that the 9.4% rise in food prices this year is the largest annual increase in 41 years.

Koehn asserted that rising food expenses are closely connected to rising costs in the commercially grown produce industry. And with rising fertilizer and gas prices, commercially grown produce is becoming more expensive to grow and transport.

“If we can cut out the middlemen of transporting food and the amount of time



Fresh flowers wait for customers in the Happy Walrus Farm Stand on Friday, Aug. 26, 2022, in Imbler. Photos by Shannon Golden/The Observer



The bright green Happy Walrus Farm Stand is open for business in Imbler on Friday, Aug. 26, 2022. Inside, customers can purchase fresh produce and flowers through a self-service system.

it’s in trucks and, and all of that, your food is fresher,” she said.

As compared to the hundreds of miles produce often travels to make it on supermarket shelves. Fresh food that makes its way to the

Happy Walrus Farm Stand is grown just over 6 miles away — not more than a 10-minute drive. Koehn, Howell, Toby and Susan began their localized gardening endeavors around two years ago, around when

the pandemic hit.

“Maybe it would be nice to get back to growing food for people and ourselves,” Koehn said of the group’s initial interest in the idea.

Koehn’s grandparents had owned land off of Happy Walrus Road in Summerville since the seventies — and used to run a small herd of cattle on their property — but had never utilized their acreage for market gardening. With the go-ahead from them, Koehn, her parents and her partner began growing their own market garden on the property in 2020.

They began growing all manner of produce, including squash, zucchini, cabbage, chard, potatoes, onions, broccolini, green beans, tomatoes, eggplant and more. The group has

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Colorful local produce and flowers sit on a table in the Happy Walrus Farm Stand in downtown Imbler on Friday, Aug. 26, 2022. The stand opened Aug. 20.

Lumber prices soar, then abruptly fade

By MIKE ROGOWAY
The Oregonian

PORTLAND — Oregon forest products companies have endured a wild stretch over the past two years, with lumber prices quintupling during the pandemic and then fading back to something close to normal.

The extreme price swings are another sign of the supply chain chaos and economic upheaval that accompanied COVID-19.

Soaring lumber prices were a harbinger of coming inflation when they began their steep upward climb two years ago. Now, a rapid fall could help

moderate historic inflation in other sectors that use lumber.

Lumber prices soared from around \$300 per 1,000 board feet of lumber in the weeks before the pandemic hit in 2020 to more than \$1,600 in the spring of 2021.

Demand also soared in 2020 amid an uptick in homebuilding — an industry that wasn’t disrupted by COVID-19 health restrictions — and a surge in home-improvement projects by do-it-yourselfers. People across the country were cooped up at home with fewer alternatives for spending their wages and pandemic relief payments.

At the same time, the lumber

supply was disrupted by a shortage of truck drivers and millworkers. The resulting squeeze pushed prices to astronomical levels.

“Prices skyrocketed from what was actually a pretty stable trend for decades,” said Brandon Kaetzel, principal economist at the Oregon Department of Forestry.

Prices then went into steep decline as producers unsnarled their supply chains and rising interest rates cut into home sales. That, in turn, reduced home construction and lumber demand.

It’s great for lumber producers when prices rise, but the

upside was short-lived before prices abruptly fell back to earth. Current prices are around \$500 per 1,000 board feet, up only modestly from right before the pandemic — and down slightly from 2018 and 2019.

Some companies couldn’t meet peak demand during the pandemic because of their own labor or supply constraints. Others, Kaetzel said, took advantage of the brief surge to invest in mill upgrades.

“I’d hesitate to say it was a windfall for anybody,” he said.

Not among independent Oregon mills, anyway. Boise

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